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## **Smackdown in Statuary Hall**

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Myths, rumors and misinformation are rampant on Capitol tours as more than 8,000 visitors churn through the building on a given day.

A tour group in the rotunda recently gazed at John Trumbull's portrait of Pocahontas's baptism. One woman asked, "Who is that man standing behind Pocahontas?"

"That's who she married — John Smith," the staffer tour guide shouted in response above the din of other tours.

"Did she really marry him?" the lady continued in astonishment.

"Yes!" nodded the staffer.

"Did you hear that?" the mother told her young son in a baseball cap. "Pocahontas really did marry John Smith!"

Pocahontas actually married a man named John Rolfe — she falls in love with John Smith in the Disney animated movie.

Many interns who give tours say they make up stories all the time when they don't know answers to questions. Staff have admitted to feeding outright lies to interns coming in, just to make them look like fools. Many professional guides in the Capitol Guide Service are appalled, viewing staff guides as abusers of American history.

The Guide Service offers training to staffers and interns, but myths about the Capitol persist.

One of the red-shirted tour guides of the Guide Service who spoke anonymously recounted in red-hot fury the myths he has heard in his decade-plus as a tour guide. Guides are not permitted to go on record to the press.

He described another of Trumbull's paintings hanging in the rotunda, depicting George Washington's resignation as commander of the U.S. Army. He recalled one aide explaining that Washington apologized to Congress for losing the Revolutionary War.

In Statuary Hall, a likeness of Hawaiian king Kamehameha is striking with its gold draping. The story goes that the statue of the king arrived at the Capitol naked, and that

the piece was sent back to Hawaii to be clothed — which is false. The Hawaiian delegation was furious when they found out about the propagated myth in 2003, calling it “highly insulting” that Kamehameha was portrayed with so little dignity. Unfortunately, the story is still told, as interns repeat it day after day in full historical confidence.

Perhaps because Hawaii is so far from the continent, it’s easy for staffers to mangle its history. Another subject of myth is a statue of a Hawaiian, Father Damien, standing on the main hall on the House side. Damien lived and worked in a leper colony and died of leprosy.

As one staffer led her tour by the statue, she explained, “He had to wear a box under his clothes so they wouldn’t rub his skin off.” Many others passed by and said the same thing to nodding listeners. The statue is, yes, boxy due to the artist’s style, but Damien never wore a box under his clothes.

Back in the Rotunda, a staffer insisted that the rotunda is 340 feet high (it’s 180). Many say that the Statue of Liberty can fit inside, which is only technically true if you discount the 150-foot base that the statue stands on in New York, which makes it 305 feet tall, significantly larger than the size of the rotunda.

Peter Byrd, a former professional tour guide, began giving tours in 1980 and retired in 2003 after giving 13,133 tours. He wrote a history of the Guide Service.

When people on his tours asked the difference between his tours and the staff-led tours they saw, he responded: “I’ve been giving tours here and studying this place full-time now for over 20 years, whereas most of those staff guides have been giving tours for at least several minutes.”

He says that good guides are “guardians” of the Capitol’s history, with a duty to keep out misinformation. They aren’t just talking textbooks, though.

“The worst thing was a tour guide who hadn’t done his homework,” he said. “The second worst thing was a tour guide who wasn’t interesting.”

A tour stuffed with dry historical facts is murder, he said. It has to be part theater, part history.

Both the House and Senate historian’s offices fiercely protect the record of Capitol history. The House historian’s office only has been in place for two years, though one did exist 10 years ago and dissolved. The Senate has had a historical office for more than 30 years.

Fred Beuttler, deputy House historian, works under a mountain of books in a tiny Cannon office. The historian’s office is trying to dispel some of the less-than-accurate legends.

“When [interns] tell stories, even if they say they’re false, that’s what people remember,” Beuttler said. “The way to get rid of them [false stories] is not to repeat them.”

In the months after its creation, the House office set up rigorous historical training for the red-shirt tour guides. They also offer sporadic training for staff and interns giving tours. The voluntary get-togethers draw 30 or 40 interns and staff on average, and take place every month.

If it finds staff-led tours appalling, the historian's office isn't quite content with how the professional guides tell the story, either. The Statuary Hall, for one, is a neglected historical landmark, in Beuttler's opinion. The Hall, which served as the floor of the House from 1807 to 1857, witnessed some of the most important decisions and debates during the expansion of the U.S., according to Beuttler: the Missouri Compromise, the independence of Texas and the issue of slavery. Instead of talking about these events, many red-shirt and staff-led tours speak of how it is a "whisper room," where you can hear a whisper travel from one side of the domed space to the other.

"We want to get rid of the whisper room," said Beuttler, adding that any room with such a half-spherical ceiling has a whisper effect. One of the myths is that John Quincy Adams would pretend to sleep while listening to conversations on the other side of the room. Nearly every staffer and intern who came through the hall in one afternoon repeated the story as fact. One red-shirt tour guide bent down to whisper across the room, "That story about John Adams falling asleep is not true!"

Though it's difficult to squash such stories, many offices try to give their tour-givers thorough training. Brad Mascho, a spokesman for the late Rep. Paul Gillmor (R-Ohio), gave tours for the congressman four years ago. He said his office stocks guidebooks for interns and new staffers.

"There's some self-teaching," Mascho said. He says he visited the Library of Congress to do research on the building before giving tours so he wouldn't "look like a fool."

Mascho explained that staff tours are good for constituents making their first trip to the Capitol because staffers can make the tour more personal, with more talk about the district itself.

Members of Congress also give some excellent tours — rare though they may be. Rep. Zach Wamp (R-Tenn.) is known for giving a performance that even those from outside his district want to see. Foreign dignitaries have signed up. Unless he is out of town, he is the only one in his office to conduct tours — he has done a total of 1,700. They can last anywhere from 45 minutes to three hours. Now they all take place at night, because there's so little room in his schedule during the day.

Wamp called giving tours his favorite part of the job. He is self-taught, reading histories of the Capitol and Tennessee in his spare time. The red-shirt guides give him tips and answer his questions.

"I'm constantly doubling back and saying, 'What's the real story on this?'" he said.

The Capitol Visitors Center could change the tour culture substantially, offering a 16,000-square-foot exhibit on the history of the Capitol. More guides and visitor staff will be hired. Tourists won't snake down the sidewalk, loitering in the hot sun until they are herded into the historic building. Instead the new building can process 3,500 people an hour, lessening the current chaos in Capitol corridors.

Along the way, the Guide Service and historian's offices continue to work on "myth-busting."

"It's frustrating that the average young staffer doesn't know history. The answer is not to stop them, it's to educate them," Beuttler said.